SUSTAINING THE FUTURE
PRESS RELEASE

EARTH SUMMIT

NEW UN COMMISSION, ENVIRONMENT MINISTERS PUT RIO AGREEMENTS INTO ACTION

UNITED NATIONS, 28 June -- The UN Commission on Sustainable Development, the body charged with implementing the agreements made at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro one year ago, has agreed on positive steps to prevent the further ecological degradation of the planet.

United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development

As part of the Commission's first session (14-25 June), over 40 cabinet-level ministers met on 23-24 June, bringing a spirit of urgency, cooperation and political will to the debate.

To tackle the difficult North-South issues of how to raise finance for sustainable development and how to provide environmentally sound technologies in developing countries, the 53-nation Commission set up two working groups which will present concrete proposals to the Commission when it meets again in May next year. Since these working groups will be composed of finance and technology experts, nominated by their Governments, there are good prospects that they will be able to take the debate a step beyond political rhetoric.

In a major initiative, the United States, represented by Timothy Wirth, State Department Counselor, announced at the ministerial meeting that, in partnership with Colombia, it planned to take a strong role in the technology working group. Colombia is the current chair of the "Group of 77" developing countries at the UN.

At his closing press conference, Ambassador Razali Ismail (Malaysia), the Chair of the Commission, noted that US attempts to bridge the North-South gap at the session signalled a "sea change" from their isolated position in Rio.

ENVIRONMENT MINISTERS TAKE INITIATIVE

Arguing that the Commission must have a "high political profile" and take concrete action, or else risk losing the momentum of Rio, a number of environment ministers offered to host informal working meetings on the major sectoral issues to be tackled at next year's Commission session. Among these, France offered to organize a roundtable on water quality and public health; Morocco and the Netherlands, meetings on fresh water; Denmark, on health; Sweden, on risk assessment and management of chemicals; and Norway, a workshop on environmentally friendly technology, in cooperation with UNCTAD, and an expert meeting to assist the

Commission in monitoring financial resources. Canada said that the International Institute for Sustainable Development in Winnipeg is setting up an informal forum on environment and trade.

Many environment ministers reported that, as recommended in Rio, their Governments had drafted their own national green plans based on Agenda 21 -- the comprehensive set of recommendations adopted in Rio -- and had set up commissions to monitor the delicate balance between environmental health and economic development. Over 100 countries have taken such actions in the past year, according to the UN Development Programme.

The Commission agreed on a multi-year agenda by which environmental issues would be taken up once during a three-year period, as follows: health, human settlements and fresh water (1994); toxic chemicals and hazardous wastes (1994); land, desertification, forests and biodiversity (1995); and atmosphere, oceans and seas (1996). Cross-sectoral themes such as poverty, consumption patterns, finance and technology will be discussed annually. All issues will be considered by 1997, when the UN General Assembly is set to conduct a major review of Agenda 21. The secretariat that will lay the groundwork for the Commission's meetings is headed by Mr. Nitin Desai of India.

The Commission also decided on guidelines for countries to submit voluntary reports on national activities and problems in promoting sustainable development. Ambassador Razali saw this as a "confidence-building" phase to overcome the fears of some developing countries that the Commission might become a watchdog body that would judge countries on their environmental records, without regard to economic and political constraints, and that aid might be tied to a country's environmental policies. Razali hopes the reports will be used in a cooperative spirit to share concrete experiences and find solutions.

FINANCING

At the Commission session, several new financing initiatives were mentioned toward raising the estimated $125 billion per year needed by developing countries from the international community to put Agenda 21 into action. Japan announced that, pending approval by its cabinet, it planned to increase its official development assistance (ODA) over the next five years by $70-75 billion, a 40-50% increase. Denmark said it was expanding its ODA to 1.5% of GNP. This is well above the target of 0.7% of GNP for ODA reaffirmed at the Earth Summit, a goal only a handful of countries have met. In fact, a number of countries have cut back their ODA in the past year because of economic recession.

Many donor countries, rather than announce new and additional funds, emphasized that existing aid, including that from multilateral banks, should be redirected to environmentally sound development. Some developing countries reiterated that funding requirements in Agenda 21 were not being met, and called for economic measures including debt relief. Others emphasized their specific national activities, perhaps partly to overcome donor concerns that funding be effectively used.

NGO PARTICIPATION

Reflecting the high level of public involvement in the Rio process, some 350 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) participated in the Commission's session, many from developing countries.

They have played a major role in keeping public pressure on the Government debate, and issued a number of important reports and position papers.

OTHER RIO FOLLOW-UP MEASURES

Climate Change and Biodiversity Conventions. The two legally-binding Conventions that were opened for signing in Rio -- aimed at preventing global climate change and the extinction of biologically diverse species -- have received rapid approval and are likely to enter into force before the end of the year. As of 21 June 1993, 168 Governments have signed the Convention on Biological Diversity and 166 have signed the Framework Convention on Climate Change. The biodiversity agreement has been ratified by national legislatures in 20 countries of the 30 required for the convention to take effect. The climate change convention requires 50 ratifications and has received 26. These conventions will have their own monitoring bodies, composed of countries party to them, which will also negotiate future protocols, for example, to further restrict greenhouse gas emissions.

Other specific initiatives called for in Agenda 21 include:

- an international legal agreement to combat **desertification**, especially in Africa. The Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for a Convention on Desertification held its first session in Nairobi, from 24 May to 3 June 1993, and will begin negotiations in Geneva in September. The text of the Convention is expected to be completed by June 1994.

- a global Conference on the Sustainable Development of **Small Island States**, to be held in April 1994 in Barbados. The Preparatory Committee will meet in New York, 2-13 August 1993. Technical meetings were held in Vanuatu, 31 May-4 June, for countries of Asia, the Pacific and Indian Oceans; and in Trinidad and Tobago, 28 June-2 July for the Caribbean and Atlantic States.

- a Conference on **Straddling and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks**, to be held from 12 to 30 July 1993 in New York. At issue is the sustainable management of highly migratory species of fish and those which straddle countries' 200-mile exclusive economic zones.

Population Conference. Many of the issues raised at the Earth Summit will again take centre stage at the UN Conference on Population and Development, to be held in Cairo, 5-13 September 1994. The Conference is being organized by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) to build global consensus on population issues as they relate to sustainable development and to seek ways to implement the 1974 UN World Population Plan of Action. The second preparatory meeting for the Conference was held in May in New York, and a third is planned for April 1994, also in New York.

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Available on request:
Complete text of Agenda 21 or 40-page Press Summary
Texts of Rio Declaration, Forest Principles,
Conventions on Climate Change and Biodiversity

DPI/1390 - 28 June 1993

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